ISLAND OF ORDER*

PHI BETA KAPPA is one of those rare organizations which does not have to be explained. Even many of those who properly say, "It's Greek to me," know, or think they know, the significance of the Society if not its letters and symbols. The election of those whom we welcome as new members of Phi Beta Kappa is, therefore, a matter of no small consequence. Everyone honored, whatever his native intellectual endowment, has worked long and arduously, although perhaps unconsciously, for his laurels. His election has been justified almost entirely on the basis of clearly demonstrated personal achievement; for happily, there is only the slightest possible element of subjective judgment involved in the selection of the wearers of the golden key. Moreover, those elected not only have the minor satisfaction of belonging to the oldest Greek letter society, as the ritual perhaps too smugly points out; they also have, probably unwittingly, assumed the major responsibilities which are the inevitable price of proved potentialities for preeminence.

Perhaps some of the initiates as yet have little real notion of the distinction that is actually theirs. Accordingly it may not be amiss to point out that they have attended one of the 160 institutions, out of the 1,859 colleges in the nation, which are regarded as sufficiently distinguished to merit a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. To be in the top ten per cent of one's class at a school which ranks well within the top ten per cent of the colleges and universities of the land is no small accomplishment. It is a matter of real significance.

* Based on Phi Beta Kappa orations given in 1954-1955 at the Rice Institute, the University of Texas, and Southern Methodist University.

But even as I compliment them, I also wish to charge the new members of "our ancient and honorable society" in pertinent words made venerable through long usage in the fraternity. "The honor conferred on you today is one that will be included in any future summaries of your careers: see to it that it shall not be the *only* honor by which you are remembered."

For nearly 180 years the Society has steadily grown in size. It has also consistently maintained its reputation as the chief American sponsor of high scholarship and cultural growth. It has been the intellectual midwife to, if not the physical parent of, the entire fraternity system, social as well as honorary. But I fear that it may have lost rather than gained luster as a Society influential for good in the affairs of our nation. Perhaps it is impossible—or even pointless were it possible—for Phi Beta Kappa to recapture its earlier position of prominence. Our Society was only a lusty infant during the crises of the late 1770's. Nevertheless, most of its founding members—men such as Mr. Justice Bushrod Washington and Chief Justice John Marshall of the Supreme Court—exerted a powerful and salutary influence on the affairs of the newborn nation.

Today a thriving and growing Phi Beta Kappa functions in another time of crisis. Literally thousands of its members occupy positions of influence and trust both in and out of our government. I wish we might be sure that they wield that influence honorably and for the common good. Fortunately there is sound direct evidence that almost all of them do. Unfortunately there is also some direct evidence that a few of them do not.

Possibly, then, it would be helpful to all of us in the Society to re-read at least once a year Ralph Waldo Emer-

son's famous essay of 1837—118 years ago—entitled, "The American Scholar," or at least the following portion of it:

> The Scholar is that man who must take up unto himself all the ability of the time, all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future. He must be an university of knowledges. If there be one lesson more than another which should pierce his ear, it is, The world is nothing, the man is all; yourself is the law of all nature, and you know not yet how a globule of sap ascends; in yourself slumbers the whole of Reason; it is for you to know all; it is for you to dare all. Mr. President and Gentlemen, this confidence in the unsearched might of man belongs, by all motives, by all prophecy, by all preparation, to the American Scholar.

It is not far-fetched to suggest that Ralph Waldo Emerson would be exasperated with today's manners, morals, and men. I, too, am commonly filled with exasperation, for I am out of sympathy with many characteristics of the Modern World—as I hope you are—as, indeed, all members of Phi Beta Kappa should be.

In the confused and confusing contemporary scene there are, fortunately, others in all nations, of all political persuasions, and of many different faiths who are also exasperated. One of these is Albert Schweitzer. Not long ago (1949) he wrote:

> I find myself in complete contradiction with the spirit of the times because it is filled with contempt for thought. . . . not only with contempt but with distrust. Organized state, social and religious communities are out to get the individual to accept their principles and convictions ready-made. A man of independent thought, spiritually free, is uncomfortable to have around, strange, from the organizational point of view, unreliable. Organizations seek their strength not in the spiritual value of the ideas they espouse or of the people that make up their membership, but in an extreme of closed uniformity, providing supposedly maximum power both of attack and resistance.
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> So the spirit of the times does not mourn, rather it rejoices in the fact that thinking appears to be unequal to its task . . .

> In a time that looks upon anything it suspects of being rational or of originating in independent thinking, as ridiculous, inferior, outmoded, no longer worth considering, that scorns even the inalienable human rights established in the 18th century, I declare myself to be one who puts his trust in rational thinking. . . .
>
> [And] because I trust in the power of truth and the spirit, I [still] believe in the future of mankind.

This might well be considered an invitation to all members of our Society to put our "trust in rational thinking" and reaffirm our own belief in the future of mankind. In the minds of some, that belief possibly has been undermined by the very speed which characterizes most modern actions and reactions. The killing pace at which we live has even become the subject of a considerable body of wry humor. For example, under a painting of the great race horse, Man O'War's owners had, with understandable pride, inscribed the following legend: "This is the fastest horse the world has ever seen." But this line was trumped by a young wit who wrote beneath, in crayon, "This is the fastest world the horse has ever seen."

Morality—or the lack of it—is the subject of much joking, too. Some time ago, on a major radio hook-up, I heard Al Jolson say to Oscar Levant, "There's one thing money can't buy—that's youth." And Oscar immediately retorted, "Here's one youth money *can* buy." The studio audience roared its approval.

There is also much jesting about love and hate and social problems generally. For example, one of the *New Yorker's* most appreciated cartoons—a Peter Arno creation—portrays a man at a bar orating to a group of kindred spirits. He is saying, "I hate everybody regardless of race, color, religion, or point of national origin."

There was a time when public servants were rather widely

revered. That time has long since passed. Our modern sense of values suggests that, of course, most elected and appointed officers are crooked. This attitude was once pretty well epitomized by an editorial in the *New York World Telegram* which read, in part, as follows:

> The mayor of Havana, who killed himself because he could not make good on a campaign promise, set an example which we trust will not be taken seriously by our own politicians. Such a practice in our country could almost amount to mass suicide of elected public officials.

Not only do we distrust many of our public servants—we even come to distrust our country and at least some of its motives. So widespread is this suspicion that one of our better so-called humorous magazines knew it would have many appreciative readers when it related the following story: In the Buffalo Zoo, prominently displayed on the nest of a bald eagle is a sign saying, "This eagle never fishes for himself if he can rob the more skillful and industrious fish hawk." And then, as if in afterthought, this appended sentence, "The bald eagle is our national emblem."

Despite the billions of dollars we have poured into foreign countries, we have never been able to rid many of their people of the notion that the habits of the bald eagle and of Uncle Sam are nearly if not quite identical. Even in the motherland of England, resentment of America and Americans is as much the rule as the exception. Not long ago an international debate was even held at the Oxford Union on this challenging resolution: "In the opinion of this house, Columbus went too far."

It might be well to inquire carefully into the reason for our widespread unpopularity abroad. Is it the result of the sheer orneriness of the people being helped, or may it not be due to some of our own defects and derelictions?

That we are guilty, along with other nations, of failure to bring some order out of the post-war chaos, is well suggested by a still pertinent, though eight-year-old, poem by Ethel Jacobsen entitled, "Christmas, 1947."

"Peace on earth, and plenty,
And good will to man
(Except perhaps in Hungary,
Korea or Iran).

Liberty's enthroned now
Where tyrants once swept in
(Though possibly confusing
To Pole and Greek and Finn).

Soldier yields to Statesman,
Speech grows grandiose.
Victory is ours now.
(Do not look too close)."[1]

But those of the new generation of Phi Beta Kappas had better look "close," for the very real world they are soon to meet face to face seems to many careful observers to be moving irresistibly toward another conflict. The staggering costs of the past global struggle in money, morals, and mortals shocks most individuals of all nationalities; but such costs apparently deter no nation. Nor does the fact that wars are never won—not even by the victors. Indeed, when a nation wins a war today it gains no booty, but merely the painful task of supporting and rehabilitating the vanquished.

Despite these sad facts, whose significance no one even attempts to deny, it seems almost impossible to develop really constructive programs designed to perpetuate world peace. Of course, in this particular matter we are merely following the ancient pattern set and maintained by our forebears.

[1] Reprinted by Special Permission of *The Saturday Evening Post.*

The Society of International Law of London has demonstrated that during the past 4,000 years more than 8,000 peace treaties have been drawn. And the result? There have been 268 years of peace; 3,732 years of war. And has there been any recent sequel? Yes, in many quarters World War III is freely predicted. Moreover, as ex-President Truman once correctly stated, "The Communists have no respect for signed treaties or their given word," and yet, because we are still a nation made up largely of men of good will, for months—indeed, for years—we have gone to unusual lengths in our attempt to secure signed treaties and other agreements from—Communists!

There is still another modern development in the age-old cyclical drama of war, treaty, and "peace,"—war, treaty, and "peace." We are now faced with enormous over-all defense expenditures, the size of which, because of carry-over items, is difficult to determine—but we will probably be not 25 per cent wrong if we consider them to total about sixty billion dollars.

How many really know how much that is? It is enough to pay all the bills at the Rice Institute at the present budgetary level for approximately the next 25,000 years. Stated in another way, such a sum probably would be large enough to underwrite the operation of *all* the colleges and universities in the land for the next twenty years. It would pay the total educational costs of three million doctors; it would provide about 30,000,000 young foreigners each with a $2,000 fellowship for study, travel and developing friendships in the United States; or, the $60,000 million could wipe out some 600,000 of those same young potential friends—that is, if the cost of killing has not risen above the World War II level, which was approximately $100,000 per enemy slain.

Albert Schweitzer apparently was correct when he said that "the spirit of the times is filled with contempt for thought." But at least some younger members of Phi Beta Kappa are thinking. In reply to one of the common criticisms of college students, Frank Robinson, a relatively recent member of Wisconsin Beta of Phi Beta Kappa—and a man who has achieved success as a science-fiction writer—wrote that the problems of the past "are rather small compared to the problems of today."

> If the younger generation expresses some doubt as to their goal and destination, I think it's understandable. I haven't heard any of the older generation speak in anything but generalities and platitudes as to the solution of their problems.
>
> Perhaps the worst—and the best—thing that can be said about the modern generation is this: They have ideals but they are understandably cynical about idealism.

Frank Robinson is right—the modern generation does have ideals—yes, high ideals. We can at least expect members of Phi Beta Kappa to cling to them as long as they live. Frank is right, too, about the inability of even the most idealistic of many of the older members of the Society to do anything very practical toward the solution of the world's problems. Cynicism regarding idealism, therefore, is broadly based, and shared by far more disillusioned "oldsters" than one generally cares to admit in public. Frankly, I believe that a certain amount of persistent intellectual doubt is the logical and desirable result of any good education, but if one does cling firmly to his ideals he can rid himself of something quite different—searing cynicism and its deleterious effects. It is still possible to keep one's eye on the mountains while struggling through the unavoidable mire at their base. As philosopher Alfred North Whitehead has pointed out, moral education and progress are "impossible apart

from the habitual vision of greatness." I hope, therefore, that you will not be too much disturbed either by my perhaps too critical remarks or by the prevalence of such statements as the following:

> Our earth is degenerate in these latter days; there are signs that the world is speedily coming to an end; bribery and corruption are common; children no longer obey their parents; every man wants to write a book; and the end of the world is evidently approaching.

The foregoing words are not, as some have thought, those uttered recently by one of the prophets of doom among our radio commentators. They were written by some disgruntled intellectual nearly forty-eight centuries ago, and impressed on an Assyrian clay tablet which was dug up near Istanbul, Turkey.

World troubles of today *do* have an ancient flavor, but, as Editor Grove Patterson of the *Toledo Blade* once observed, "Yes, there is human progress, but most of the road is bad gravel and the wagons of civilization travel slowly." Recently they have been gathering speed.

It is now 12 A.D. We are living in the twelfth year of Atomic Development. Probably no other modern achievement so marks the potential problems of these times from those of the generation past, or even those of centuries ago. As Sir Owen Franks has remarked, in our day, the discovery of nuclear fission is something like "the moment when Galileo looked through his telescope and destroyed forever a picture of the universe which men had cherished for centuries."

One of the oldest of all college stories concerns the freshman who, in answer to a routine history question, wrote that "Dante stood with one foot in the Middle Ages and with the other he saluted the rising star of the Renaissance." Al-

though one may reasonably doubt that even the great Dante could manage such a difficult anatomical feat, the startling modern atomic developments may require Phi Beta Kappas to accommodate their minds and bodies to similarly cramping situations.

Matter can now be transmuted and space has been nearly annihilated. But although at least some of the many great scientific problems have been solved, almost all of the major moral and spiritual problems have resisted solution or have grown more complex. One scientist has commented about this continuing anomaly in the following fashion:

> The rapid progress true science now makes, occasions my regretting sometimes that I was born so soon. It is impossible to imagine the height to which may be carried, in a thousand years, the power of man over matter. O, that moral science were in a fair way of improvement, that men would cease to be wolves to one another, and that human beings would at length learn what they now improperly call humanity.

The scientist who wrote those words, as most of you know, was Benjamin Franklin—the date was shortly after the founding of Phi Beta Kappa—1780 to be precise; but the problem is still with us. Indeed, it grows and is, I confess, much more serious for members of present day graduating classes than it was for my Class of 1922.

We like to lay the chief blame for all world conflicts on others; but as the editors of *Harper's Magazine* once suggested, Americans bother and confuse all foreigners by being a mixture of incomprehensible "irreconcilable opposites." "We are found to be the most materialistic of peoples, and the most idealistic; the most revolutionary, and the most conservative; the most gregarious and the most individualistic; the most disrespectful to our parents," and yet the great "Mom" and "Dad" worshipers.

If we confuse and irritate foreigners, however, we doubly confuse and irritate ourselves. The friction in this world is not merely external—it is internal as well. We profess surprise that nations cannot act in amity and that the United Nations cannot resolve global disputes, and yet our own backyard problems were never more complex or farther from solution.

Is the friction confined to the economic and political scenes, as some would have us believe? Far from it. The gears run hot between and within the various religious elements, they all grind noisily within and between all the interconnected parts of our complex educational machine, and the bearings commonly burn out completely in our countless family mechanisms.

Who has been throwing sand into Man's most vital machinery? Malenkov and Mao and other "captains and kings"? Definitely so—and their guilt is great. But many a monkey wrench is tossed into some vital gear-box by just plain people like us—yes, by members of Phi Beta Kappa.

Minor breakdowns in Man's machinery, which could have been prevented by individuals, often lead to major conflicts which cannot even be prevented by commonwealths.

There is, of course, an easy way in which one can meet the challenge of the Modern World. It was suggested, probably through a dozing secretary's inadvertence, to a college librarian who recently received a letter from the office of Dale Carnegie. It read in part: "Mr Carnegie is sending you under separate cover, an autographed copy of his book, *How to Stop Worrying and Stop Living*."

The only way that an intelligent person can stop worrying in a World of Friction is, indeed, to stop living. This is the situation which led Dr Reinhold Niebuhr, the well-known

American theologian, to say that, "One has the uneasy feeling that . . . there is so little health in the whole of our modern civilization that one cannot find the *island of order* from which to proceed against disorder."

But, Dr Niebuhr, there are still *islands of order.* They are our institutions of higher education. They are strong institutional islands of order because they are comprised of thousands of individual islets in the form of faculty, board members and students, both past and present. Most of these are—all of these should be—persons of good will who are well aware of the sober facts of the present, and the stirring challenge of the future.

It would even be possible for the entire world to stop worrying and to *start* living if the 400,000-odd college graduates of this June were to serve as individual islands of order, or—to change abruptly to our earlier metaphor—as flakes of graphite, rather than grains of sand, in whatever part of the global machinery they find their life position. If each were able, even in small degree, to smooth out the operation of the gears in his own small circle of activity, it can be guaranteed that some little effect would be felt throughout the complex world system, for in subtle or direct ways the entire machine is linked together.

Do you think that it is impossible for one individual—one member of Phi Beta Kappa—out of the world's two and a half billions of persons, actually to serve as an effective isle of order? Well, one part of adrenalin in three billion three hundred million is sufficient to cause a definite body reaction. The words and deeds of a single person commonly serve a similar catalytic function in quieting, or inciting, a mob—or even a nation. For example, former U.S. Senator as well as Phi Beta Kappa Senator, Frank Graham—who was

for many years president of the University of North Carolina—has served in such a catalytic capacity. At the climax of a hotly contested mudthrowing political battle he helped calm the electorate by saying:

> May our America be a place where democracy is achieved without vulgarity, difference without hate, where the majority is without tyranny and the minority without fear, where the least of these our brethren have the freedom to struggle for freedom, where respect for the past is not reaction and the hope of the future is not revolution.

It will be a little difficult for new members of the Society to improve on Senator Graham's statement. But actually there is nothing your elders have ever done or said that you cannot do or say better. They have not usurped and spoiled all the frontiers, as some pessimists claim. As members of Phi Beta Kappa, it goes without saying that the greatest of all undeveloped frontiers lies behind your eyes and between your ears. Have the courage to develop it, as an island of order from which to proceed against present as well as future disorder.

As Brooks Atkinson, the dramatic critic, has pointed out, whatever is wrong with the world today, "tomorrow comes to us untarnished by human living. No human eyes have seen it and no one can tell what it is going to be. The Chinese word for tomorrow (Ming-tien) means 'bright day.' There is the wisdom of sages and the rapture of poets in that image."

CAREY CRONEIS